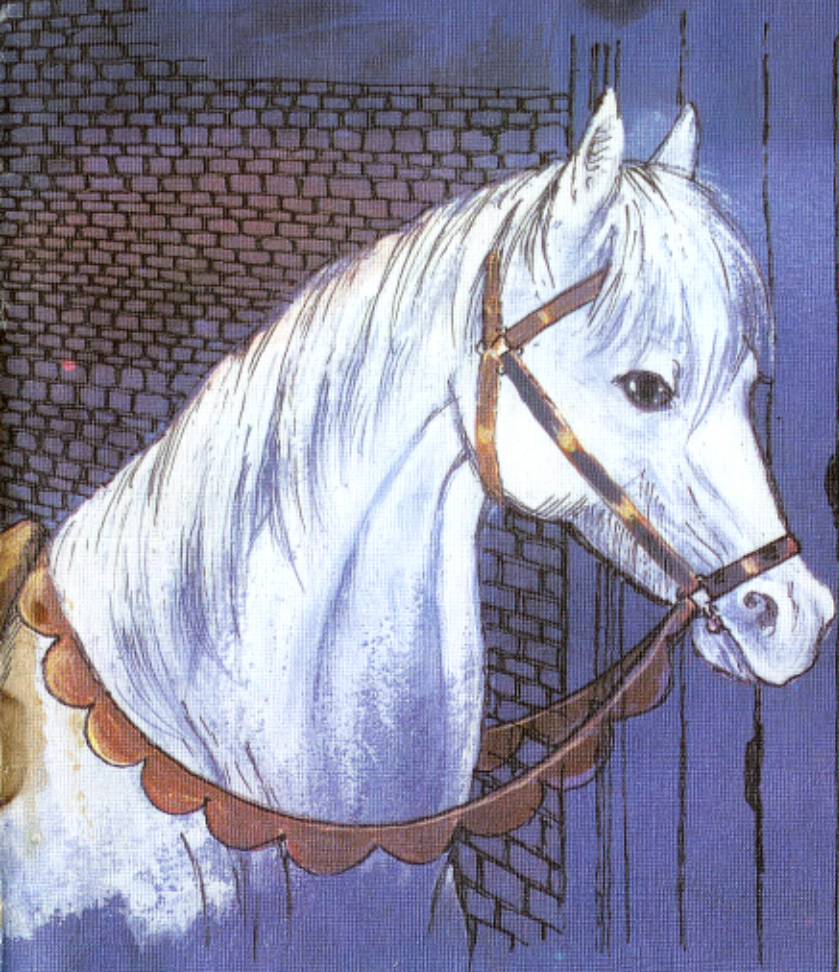


Tim and the Hidden People

# The Key

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook





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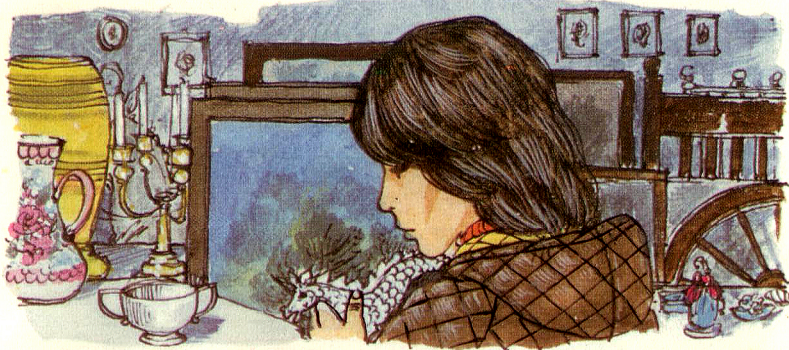
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There was a strange man standing at the bus-stop, when Tim came out of the shop.





It was evening, and Tim had been to the other end of the town.

There was an old junk shop there. It was an odd sort of shop, with piles of things here and there, which nobody bothered to sort out.

Tim liked to go and look in the window.

This time he had seen a little white dragon, half-hidden under a pile of old jugs and bits of blue and red cloth.

He went inside to ask how much it was, but it was far too much for Tim.

When he came out to go home, the man was there at the bus stop ahead of him. He was a big man. He had a three-cornered hat on his head, like Captain Jory. He wore a long green coat, and black boots, and he had a tall stick in his hand. The stick was black, with a silver top.

The bus was coming. Tim began to run, and got to the bus-stop just in time.





It was one of those buses where you pay the driver as you get in. The stranger went to his seat without paying, and the bus driver didn't even look at him.

Tim stared at him. He had a strange feeling that he had seen the man somewhere before.

As the stranger sat down, Tim saw that a pistol was pushed into his wide black belt.

"Come on, come on!" said the bus driver. "I can't wait all day!"

Tim paid his fare, and sat down.

When they came to Canal Street, Tim got off. He walked down towards The Yard.

The stranger got off too.





Tim stopped. The stranger passed him. Tim followed.

He remembered now where he had seen the stranger. He hadn't seen the man himself. He had seen a picture of him in a book in the back attic.

"It wasn't Captain Jory that I saw the other night," Tim said to himself. "It was this man. I'm sure of it."

The man came to the gap, and turned into The Yard.





Tim broke into a run. He wanted to see where the man went.

He was crossing The Yard as Tim came to the gap, and walking towards the big, empty house in the corner.

Tim stopped.

The man went in at the gate.

The door of the house opened, and he went inside.

Tim ran across to his own house.



He was just in time for tea. He sat down at the table in the basement kitchen, and Aunt May handed him a plate of fried eggs and chips.

“Have you heard about the empty house, Tim?” she asked, as she sat down.

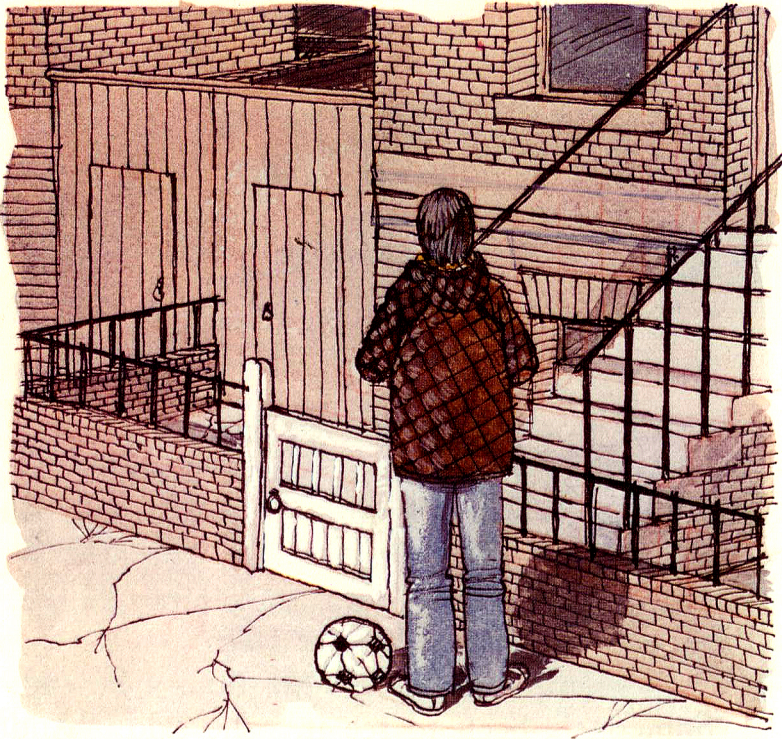
Tim’s mouth was full, so he shook his head.

“Someone’s been to see it,” she said. “And they’re coming back tomorrow. I think they’ve taken it.”

“Who is it?” asked Tim.

“I don’t know,” said Aunt May. “Mr. Berryman saw them. He said it was a family. There were two boys and a girl. He told me to tell you. He said he was glad—said you didn’t look well, and needed some friends to go out with. I think he’s right, Tim. You don’t look well. I hope you like them.”

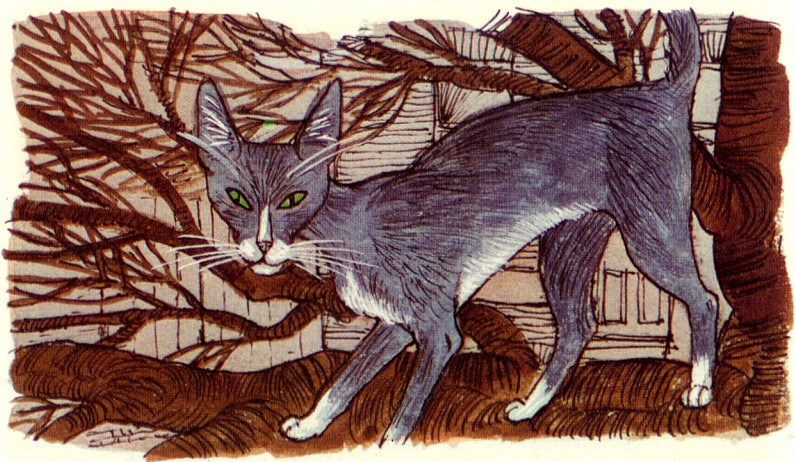




Tim finished his tea as quickly as he could, and went out again into The Yard. He got his football from the roots of the old tree, and began to kick it about. He kicked it across The Yard, down one side, and over to the corner by the empty house.

He looked in over the fence, but could see nothing. The house was dark.

Tim kicked the ball back to the tree, and put it away again.



There was a mew overhead.

He looked up, and saw a cat on one of the branches. For a moment, he thought it was Tobias, but then he saw it was Sebastian.

Tobias was black and Sebastian was grey and white, but somehow Sebastian began to look more like Tobias every day. His eyes were just as bright and green, and he twitched his tail in just the same way.

“Hallo, Sebastian,” said Tim. “Are you watching the empty house?”

Sebastian came down from the tree, and rubbed himself around Tim’s legs, purring.

Tim picked him up and took him over to Mr. Berryman’s house. He put him down inside the gate, and Sebastian ran off to the back.

Tim went home.





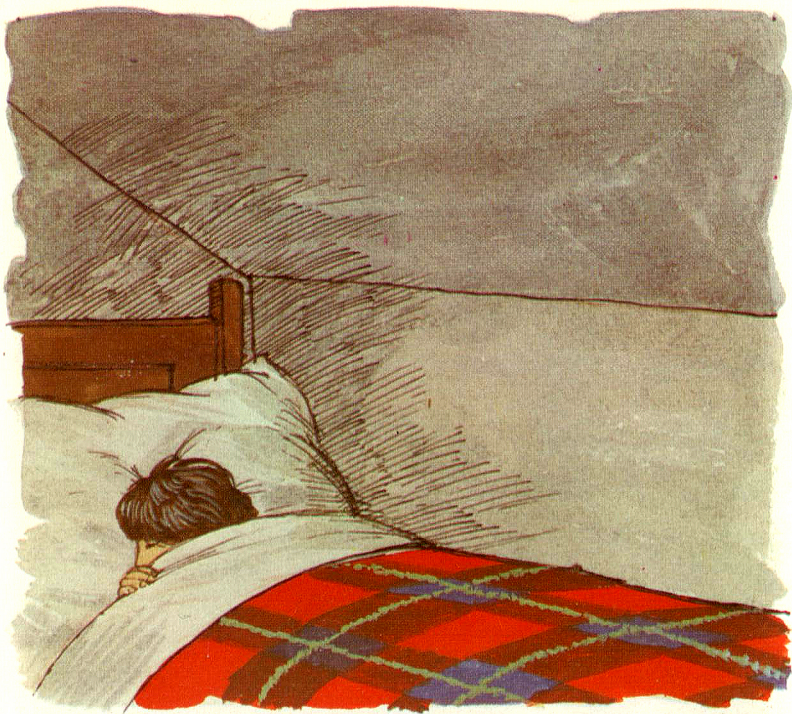
He looked into the kitchen to say “Good-night” to Aunt May.

“You’re going to bed early,” she said.

“I’m tired,” said Tim.

“You look it,” said Aunt May. “All right, off you go.”

Tim went slowly upstairs. He half-expected to see Tobias on his bed as he opened the door of his attic, but the room was empty.



He switched on the light. He took a look out of the window, but there was nobody in The Yard. The street light shone, and the windows of the other houses glowed red and yellow.

Tim pulled the curtains, and got ready for bed.

He took a last look outside, but The Yard looked just as it had done before.

He felt very tired. He climbed into bed, and fell asleep.





He had been asleep for a long time, when the door blew open with a bang.

Tim sat up.

“Who’s there?” he said.

There was no answer.

Tim felt for the matches, and lit the candle by his bed.



Tobias was standing in the open doorway.

“Hallo Tim,” he said. “I’ve just looked in to see you. I can’t stay long. I’ve got some news for you.”

He ran over to the bed, and jumped up on Tim’s feet.

“Is it about the Highwayman?” asked Tim.

Tobias shook his head.

“The Highwayman is down near Hollow Hill,” he said. “I shouldn’t go there, if I were you, Tim. But that doesn’t matter now. The Hidden People have left Hollow Hill.”





There was a long, low whistle outside.

Tobias jumped down from the bed and ran back to the door.

“I must go,” he said.

“Haven’t you got a broomstick here?” asked Tim.

“I don’t need a broomstick tonight,” said Tobias. “I came to tell you, Tim. They’re moving into the empty house.”

“Who are moving in?” asked Tim.

“Don’t be so slow, Tim!” cried Tobias. “The Hidden People are moving in, of course! Haven’t you seen them? You’ll see them all the time now, about in The Yard. And at night – just you wait!”

“But there are people moving into that house,” said Tim. “Real people.”

Tobias laughed. “They won’t stay long,” he said. “The Hidden People will see to that!”

The door was still open, and Tobias ran off down the stairs.



Tim got slowly out of bed.

He picked up the candle, and went out on to the landing.

Tobias had gone.

The house below was dark and silent.



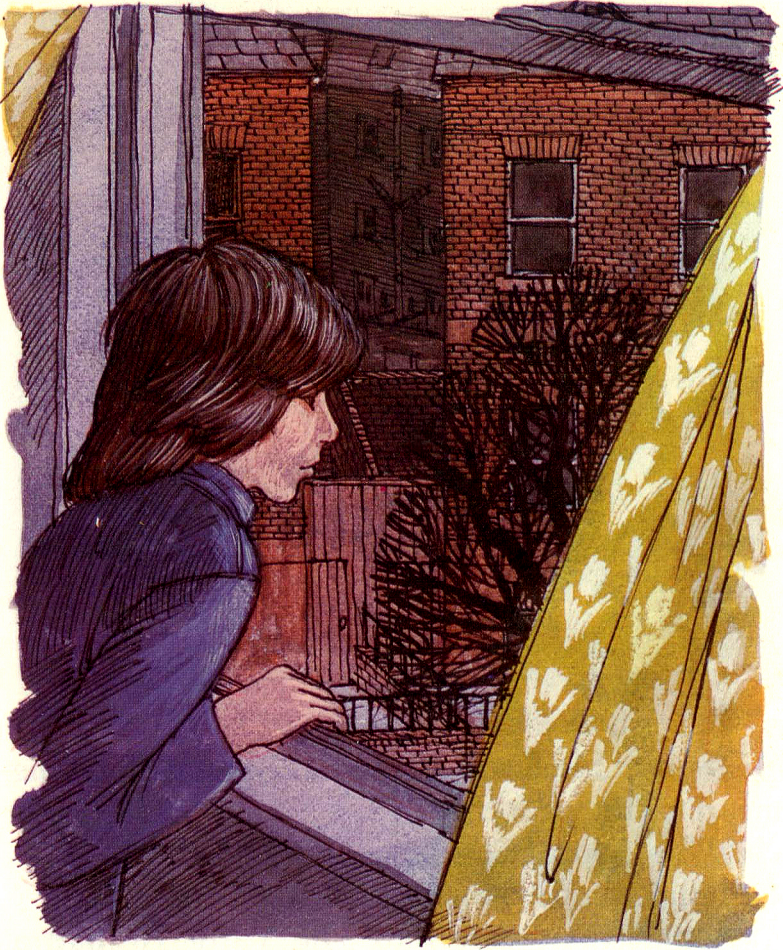


Tim shut the door and bolted it.

He blew out the candle, and went over to the window. He looked out. Someone had put out the street lamp, but the moon was shining down.

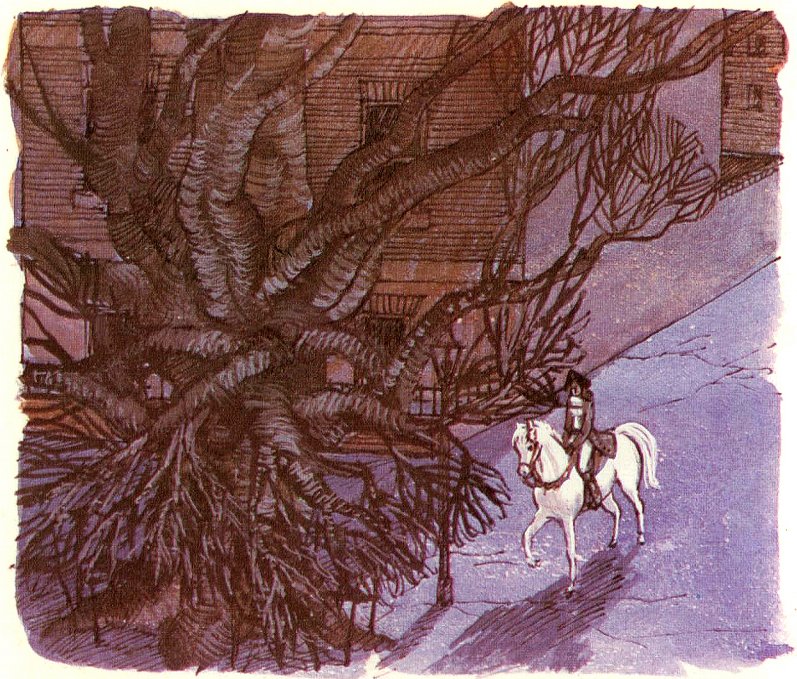
He could see the empty house in the corner.

He saw a light moving inside, as if someone was walking about with a candle in his hand.



Tim opened the window softly, and listened. He heard strange whistles in the air, but he could not tell where they were coming from. Down there in the darkness below him, someone knocked on a door.





Tim stood there, listening.

He could hear a strange sound, coming nearer and nearer.

“Clip, clop! Clipperty clop!”

“Clip, clop! Clipperty clop!”

A horseman rode into The Yard. He had a pale green coat, and a three-cornered hat, like the man he had seen in the bus. The horse was as white as the moonbeams.

The horseman rode round The Yard, and out again into the street.



Tim shut the window, and pulled the curtains across it.

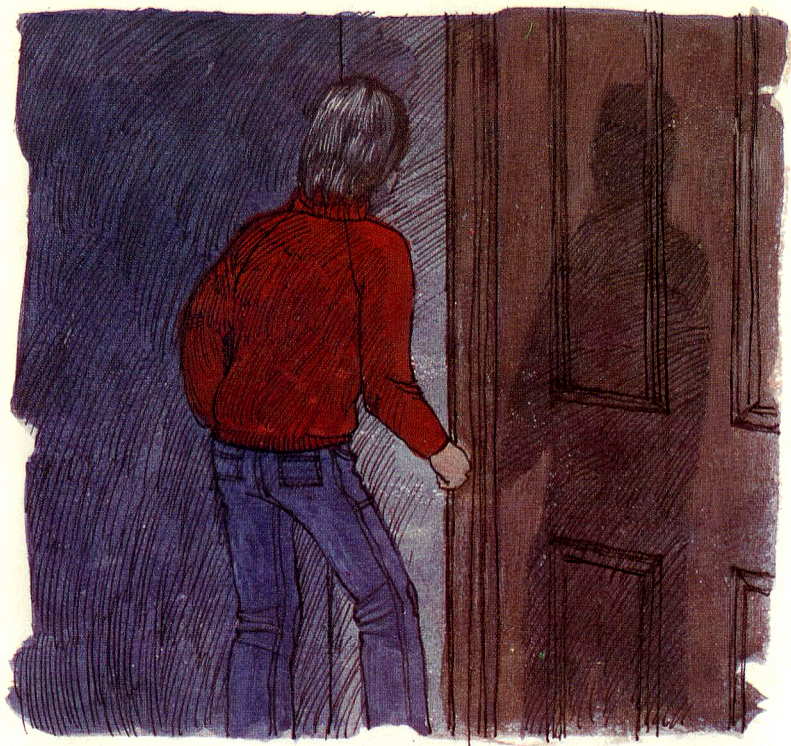
He lit the candle again, and got dressed. Then he put his hand in his pocket, and pulled out the key.

It was shining like silver.

He stood with the key in his hand, looking at it for a long time.

"I must find out," he said to himself. "I must find out for sure."





Tim slipped the key back into his pocket, blew out the candle, and went over to the door.

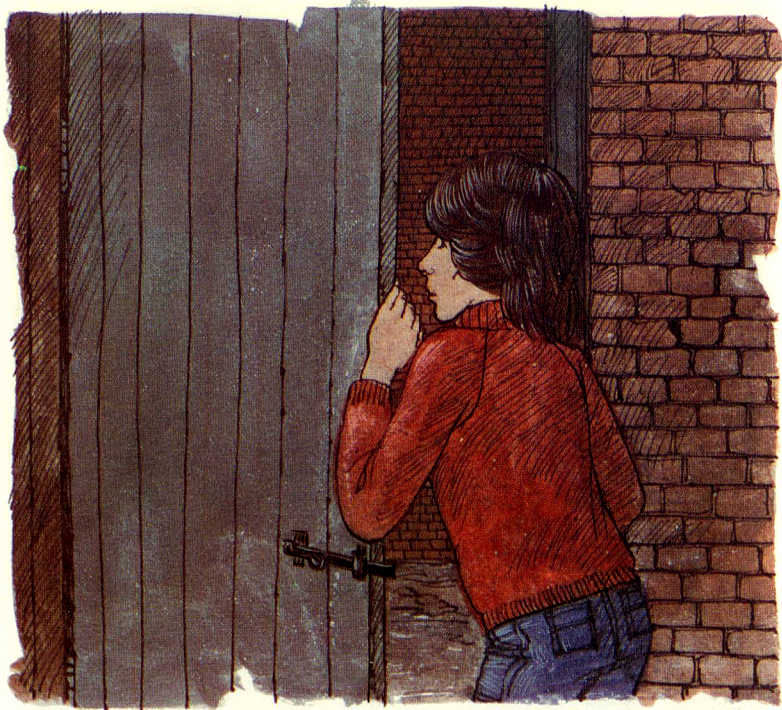
He pulled back the bolt, opened the door, and listened.

There was no sound from below.

Tim went softly down the stairs. He slipped past Mr. Bunce's room, and down to the hall.

There was no sound in the house but the ticking of the kitchen clock.

He went softly along to the back door.



Tim pulled back the bolt and slipped out of the back door into the little yard. He shut the door softly behind him.

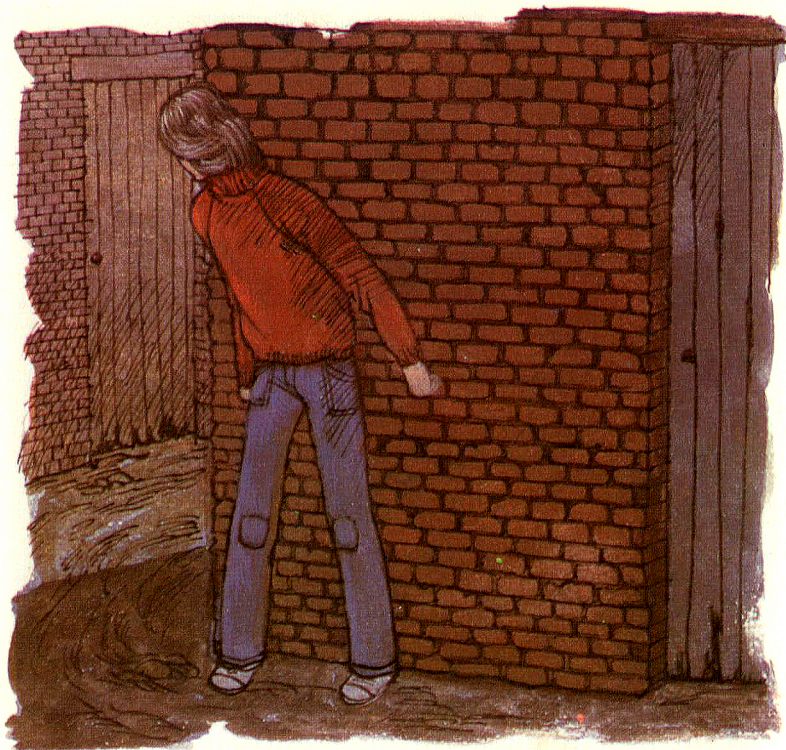
The moon was shining down, but the back yard was in shadow.

Tim pulled open the back gate into the lane. The gate creaked.

He stood still and listened. He could feel his heart beating very fast, and his hands were shaking.

There was no sound.





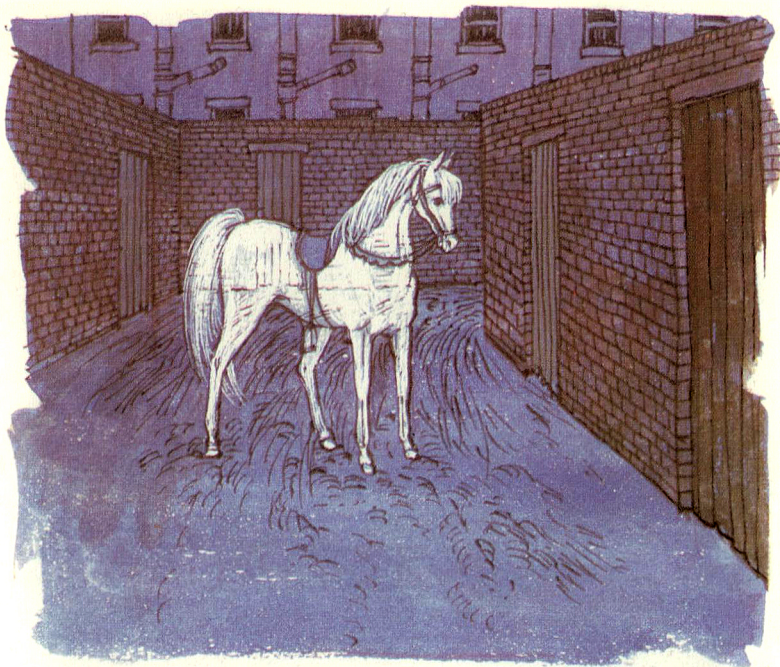
Tim slipped out into the back lane, which ran all around the backs of the houses in The Yard.

He looked both ways.

The lane was in deep shadow, but as far as he could see, there was no one there.

He turned to the right, and slipped along the lane towards the corner.

He flattened himself against the bricks, and looked carefully round the corner of the wall.



A horse was standing in the lane, by the back gate of the empty house. The horse shone white, as if it had been made of silver. Tim could see it clearly.

As he watched, the gate opened, and the horse went in. The gate shut again.

Tim turned, and slipped back down the lane to his own house. He went in the back gate, along at the side of the house, and out by the front gate into The Yard. He went carefully, making sure there was no one there.





The Yard was empty.

Tim slipped across to the big tree, keeping in the shadows as much as he could.

He climbed up into the tree, and lay out along one of the big branches, looking towards the empty house.



He could see right in at the windows. There were people inside – the Hidden People. There were women in long dresses, and men in strange coats and high boots.

The wind was blowing, and he could hear laughter in the wind.

There was a sound below him. Tim looked down. An old woman was crossing The Yard. He could only just see her in the shadows. She had a dark cloak, and a dark shawl over her head.





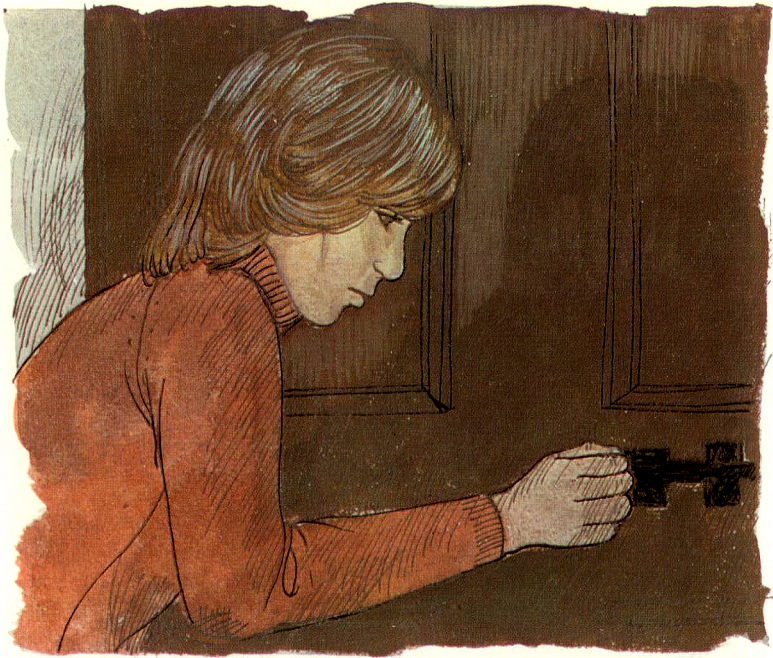
As the old woman went towards the empty house, the door opened, and light streamed out into The Yard.

It was the old woman from the house with the tiger-skin rug.

The words of the verse came into Tim's mind:

“Some witches are safe,  
Silent and strange and slow.  
Some are wicked and wild,  
And dance when the storm winds blow.  
But which witch is a wild witch?  
Only the witches know.”

The old woman went in. The door shut. The house went dark.



Tim stayed in the tree for a long time, but he saw nothing more.

The street lamp was still out, but the sky over the roof-tops was getting light. He climbed slowly down from the tree. He was tired and stiff.

He made his way slowly back across The Yard to his own house, and went round to the back door. He opened it softly, slipped inside, and bolted it behind him.

Tim could hear Mr. Bunce snoring, as he went softly up the stairs, and back to bed.





When Tim woke up, the sun was shining. It was late.

He jumped out of bed, ran over to the window, and looked down into The Yard.

There was a car standing outside the empty house. Some people were just getting out of it.

Tim pulled on his clothes, splashed his face with water, and ran downstairs, two steps at a time.

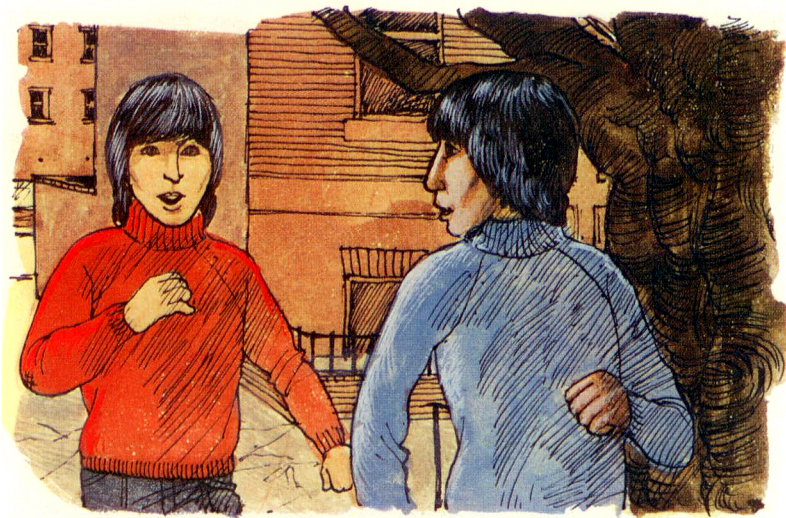
He ran across the hall to the front door.

“Breakfast is almost ready,” Aunt May called up from the kitchen.

“All right,” he shouted back. “I’m just going out. I won’t be long.”

He opened the door, ran down the steps, and stopped.

A boy was standing in The Yard looking up at the old tree.



Tim took one look, and ran forward.

“Arun!” he shouted. “Arun!”

The boy jumped round.

“Tim!” he cried. “But – I didn’t know you lived here.”

“I live in The Yard,” said Tim.

“So do I, now,” said Arun. “We’re coming to live in that empty house in the corner.”

Tim looked across at the empty house. The car was still standing outside the gate.

The door opened, and a man came out.

“Arun!” the man called. “Come on. Don’t you want to see your new home?”

“See you later, Tim,” said Arun. He ran across The Yard.





Tim pushed his hand deep into his pocket and pulled out the key. It was shining like silver.

He stood still, thinking.

He remembered what Tobias had said about real people moving into the house: "They won't stay long. The Hidden People will see to that."

He remembered what Mr. Berryman had said about his brother: "He found an old key, and after that he began to meet all kinds of strange people . . . He threw the key away, and that was the end of them."



Tim slipped the key back into his pocket, and ran across The Yard, and out into Canal Street.

He knew just what he was going to do, and he wanted to do it quickly.

He crossed the street to the canal bank.

He pulled the key out of his pocket. He didn't stop to look at it. He tossed it down into the canal.

The key flashed in the sunshine like silver, as it fell into the water. Then it was gone.





Tim could smell breakfast as he opened the door of his own house.

Aunt May looked up as he came into the kitchen.

"Hallo, Tim," she said. "How are you feeling? You're looking better. Did you see the people who are coming to the house in the corner?"

"Yes," said Tim. "There's a boy called Arun."

"Have you met already?" said Aunt May. "Mr. Berryman *will* be pleased. You didn't look very well last night, but I hope you're hungry this morning. I've cooked you a big breakfast."

She smiled at him.

Tim smiled back. "I'm hungry, all right," he said, as he sat down at the table.

# Flightpath to Reading A8

